

## Introduction: Approaching the Role of Women as a Fully and Integrally Synodal Matter

Anna F. Rowlands

**Abstract:** This Introduction frames the contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology*. It does so by introducing and framing the work of the Synod on Synodality (2021–24) and by offering an account of the textual development of the theme of women in the key documents associated with the process. It concludes by briefly outlining the focus of each article in this special issue.

This special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* stems from Pope Francis’s unprecedented decision to inaugurate a three-year synod process focused on how to be a more integrally synodal Church.<sup>1</sup> This process is known as the Synod on Synodality (2021–24).<sup>2</sup> In doing so, he expanded and up-

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**AI Disclosure:** This introduction has benefited from a light use of Grammarly AI tools to shorten and tighten sentences. No other AI has been used, and all writing is the author’s own.

<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: The word “Church” is capitalized throughout this issue since almost all uses of the word refer to the Catholic Church.

<sup>2</sup> The process of the Synod on Synodality consisted of three core phases: Consultation/Listening; Discernment; and Implementation. The process began at the grassroots level with a Listening phase, in which every local church and its associated parishes, movements, and associations were invited to undertake listening and consultation, utilizing what became known as a method of “conversation in the Spirit.” This involved face to face and online meetings focused on cycles of listening to the Word of God, listening to each other in disciplined stages of listening, and being with each other in silence between those rounds of speaking. The results of these conversations in the Spirit were then submitted to the diocese and the episcopal conference, undergoing a new synthesis at each stage. These were sent to Rome and became the basis for the first key document the Document for the Continental Stage. This text then served as the basis for the start of the second phase—the Discernment phase. This stage began in 2023 with the meeting of local churches at the level of Continental Assemblies—an innovation in all contexts other than Latin America. The reflections of the continental meetings were then passed back to Rome, and all this material was used to draft the first Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) to guide preparation for and the conduct of the First Plenary Assembly in Rome. The first Assembly in October 2023 marked the movement from the first Listening Phase of the Synod to the Discerning Phase of the Synod process. The task of the Assemblies was to actively discern a pathway towards a more synodal Church (centering the themes of

ended the model of synodal discernment mandated by Pope Paul VI for the Synod of Bishops established in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. One important feature of this novel process, which began with a global, grassroots listening process and, two years later, culminated in a gathering of the Pope with bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity in Rome, was the creation of expanded space for women's involvement. This included, for the first time in the modern era, women as full voting members of a synod. This became a context in which women could exercise their baptismal calling more fully in the context of ecclesial discernment. It also became a context in which a multi-perspectival exploration of matters pertaining to the lives of women—ecclesial and social—was discussed. That these questions were on the agenda at all and so centrally was a result of the grassroots listening phase that began the process. This discussion included questions of women's roles in the Church, a wide-ranging reflection on women's experience of ecclesial life, and their contributions to and representation in the theological tradition. It also concerned women's experience in social life and the prophetic and solidaristic requirements of Christian witness.

The questions that emerged, and the method that led to their emergence, are arguably centrally and fundamentally moral theological matters. There has been a shorthand tendency amongst some to imagine that the moral theological dimensions of the synod related primarily to "topics" in moral theology, defined habitually as challenging pastoral and moral matters pertaining to sexuality, marriage, identity and so forth. I would contend that the project of synodality is itself a moral theological project in a fundamental sense. The core questions of the Synod—centered on the themes of participation, communion, and mission—mirror core concerns addressed by funda-

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communion, participation, and mission) focused on the question 'how' might this pathway take shape. The Assembly in 2023 produced an interim Synthesis Report to continue to crystallize the discernment. This paved the way for the second Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris* in 2024, produced in Spring 2024) which again enabled those due to participate in October 2024 to prepare and guided the structure of the second Assembly. The second Assembly, therefore, took its leave from that document. In turn, the second Assembly led to the production of the Final Document, which the Pope signed into the ordinary Magisterium. This was an unusual move and avoided the need to produce a post-synodal papal exhortation. Although this description places heavy emphasis on a process punctuated by documents, the Pope insisted this process was about learning a way of being church and was precisely not about the production of documents! The third phase, now active, is the Implementation phase, in which the process is expected to take root in local churches and in the Roman Curia in a fuller form as the recommendations of the Final Document are implemented. For more on the Synod on Synodality, see the *Journal of Moral Theology's* special issue on "Listening Practices in Global Catholicism," 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): [jmt.scholasticahq.com/issue/11038-vol-13-issue-si2-2024/](http://jmt.scholasticahq.com/issue/11038-vol-13-issue-si2-2024/).

mental moral theology: how are we to be and to act as a Christian community in light of who we believe God to be; how do we understand differentiated human nature, co-creative, reciprocally orientated, yet tending towards sin and division within the divinely created order; what kind of ordered and Spirit-inspired common life in church and world are we called to create and sustain in this light; and how do we proclaim all of this vision to the world for the sake of its *salus*, its health and salvation?

Although the so-called question of women did arise as a “topic” for discussion, synod discussions were not restricted (thankfully) to considering women as a “topic.” The journey made in the very attempt to frame this debate is traceable in the documents of the Synod on Synodality, making clear the active development of reflection on these matters during the course of the three years. As will be addressed below in a little more detail, the official texts move from the presentation of the topic of women in carefully headed sub-sections and paragraphs in the early documents to an integrated presentation of the ethics of reciprocal living, where, in the latter texts, to invoke ‘women’ as a category is also to invoke men, in reciprocal exchange. The failures of recognition and participation, and the narrowing of the theological and ecclesial imagination are viewed in this way as fundamentally relational failures to live well the life of co-creative communion. A quick caveat should be added here to say that this reciprocal framing was not intended to reintroduce the notion of women as auxiliary to men—the notion that “woman” is defined only by the referent “man”; nor was the intention (for which there would have been no consensus at the Synod) to remove all use of complementarian language from theological anthropology per se, although a more discerning and theologically sharp use of the term did perhaps lie behind its more sparing and deliberate use in the texts.

Let me return, for a moment, to the intention of Pope Francis, which became the gateway to women’s full participation in this Synod. Pope Francis designed a process that meant the Church would need to learn by doing, becoming habituated through practice into a synodal renewal. *Habitus* rather than application or even implementation seemed to be his desire. This perhaps draws our imaginations towards the praxis of virtue rather than technocratic planning and application. Viewed this way, he knew that the *habitus* of synodality would be impaired if it did not include women of all vocational statuses and from across geographical contexts. Not only would the learning-together-by-doing be impaired without women’s fuller participation, but so would the quality of discernment undertaken by the synod and therefore its missiological energy.

For these reasons, Francis labored the point that the inclusion of women was not akin to a parliamentary representation process. There

are those who would have preferred this to be the Pope's intent. For good or bad, it was not. He claimed that the inclusion of women in greater numbers aimed to ensure the integrity and vitality of the synodal process. The participation of women who had been part of local churches' grassroots discernment and the continental level meetings would keep the Assemblies in Rome umbilically connected to the earlier stages of more local discernment. He wanted a chain of memory—the phrase he used repeatedly. Initially he decided on simply greater representation of women, but he was pressed by others to ensure this meant full voting membership, which he assented to.

As a number of contributors to this volume make clear, in practice the inclusion of more women through the synodal process, especially in the Assemblies themselves, was uneven across the various categories of membership and allocated roles. Women were most numerous as contributors to the Synod at the grassroots level, seemingly, by all anecdotal accounts, outnumbering men. Avril Baigent and Sandie Cornish's contributions to this volume detail this picture. Yet the episcopal conference summaries narrating the views from the pews were largely (although not entirely) drafted by men. Women were most numerous amongst the facilitators of the synod process.<sup>3</sup> The next largest group of women was amongst the voting

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<sup>3</sup> See XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "List of Participants," August 7, 2023, [press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/07/07/230707a.html#](https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/07/07/230707a.html#). The Assemblies were composed of a core of voting members. These were a majority of the participants, numbering 365. Of these, 54 were women. All the voting women were nominated by Pope Francis. The voting members were served by three other groups, which included sizable numbers of women: facilitators, expert theologians, and the staff of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. The Assemblies functioned on the basis of a combination of sessions structured around small-group discussions, written submissions from those groups, and plenary sessions. Each small group was led by an experienced facilitator who led the small group's voting members through their tasks. The facilitator role had the most even distribution of women, many of whom had higher degrees in theology or adjacent disciplines. Facilitators could not speak in plenary sessions or vote. The voting members were also served by a second category of "experts": theologians who functioned as 'periti' to the Synod. They could not speak in plenary during the 2023 Assembly but could speak in limited circumstances in 2024. They could not vote. One woman theologian, Anna Rowlands, was part of a group of four theologians chosen to give theological reflections at the plenary sessions in 2023. In 2024, several women theologians, including Myriam Wijlens and Klara Csiszar, addressed the 'fringe' theological sessions that were offered out of hours to all participants as an optional extra. The task of the theologian-experts was to act as a resource: to inform the papally-nominated document drafters; to serve amongst the small group of four core drafters; and to assist the small groups in drafting their own texts that were submitted to the drafters. In addition, the staff of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops contained a large number of women religious and lay women who were involved in assisting, organizing, and supporting the work of the Synod. They were present but

members. Finally, the smallest number, just four, were to be found amongst the theological experts. This group constituted three lay Europeans and one African religious. We should quickly add the caveat here that among both the facilitators and voting members were many “expert” women theologians, biblical scholars, philosophers, ethicists, and church historians—many more than were officially numbered in the “expert theologian” category. This participation at all levels was, nonetheless, historic.

The genesis of this special issue, then, lay in the hope that we might encourage those women participants who had relevant academic training and expertise from the Anglophone world to capture and narrate both something of their own experience of being among this historic group of women and also draw into the conversation their own expert training in their relevant fields and disciplines.<sup>4</sup> We asked these women to keep a log of their experiences and reflect over the course of the two Assemblies on an article they would like to write that drew together observations, experience, and expertise. In this way, they would contribute a reflection produced in an integrated way. In doing so, we hoped to create a modest contribution towards archiving the experiences of at least some of the women who were members of this Synod.

As the editor of this special issue, I should say something about my own positionality, albeit within certain limitations. I was an academic formally seconded by my university to work with the General Secretariat of the Synod from the point when the grassroots reports arrived in Rome and were subject to the discernment of the so-called Frascati group in the summer and autumn of 2022 until the end of the second Assembly of the Synod on Synodality in October 2024.<sup>5</sup> Through this role, I have been able to read and reflect on all of the submissions made to the process at every stage and to accompany as an expert the two synodal Assemblies in Rome, as well as the groups that met to draft the working documents, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, that set the framework for the discussions of the Assemblies. I was

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not able to speak, vote or draft. For a list of the women participants at the Synod, see the “Appendix” of this issue (186–192).

<sup>4</sup> This special issue was proposed by the Editor of the *Journal of Moral Theology*, M. Therese Lysaught, who invited Anna K. Rowlands to serve as guest editor, in order to mark this historic moment.

<sup>5</sup> The Frascati group met in Frascati in September 2022 to reflect together on the reports, individual submissions and group submissions sent to Rome during the first part of the Listening Stage of the Synod on Synodality. The group, which was drawn from each continent and consisted of bishops, priests, religious and laity, women and men, discussed and discerned the reports and contributed material towards the drafting of the Document for the Continental Stage, which in turn guided the work of the Continental Assemblies.

also one of the four women named as experts, whose task was theological accompaniment of the Synod's two Assemblies.

In that vein, and in order to frame and provide some context, without repeating or stealing the thunder of the essays that follow, I will set out below just one framing dimension for the conversation: the developing textual narrative on the question of women as it emerged through the various documents and stages of the Synod on Synodality. I am restricting myself here to a discussion that focuses on texts and drawing from a) published material that exists in forms of the public domain, even if restricted to certain ecclesial publics, and b) the key texts of the process, all of which are available online and searchable. I am not making use here of the wider materials that might be available to later generations of researchers through the Synod's archive.

The desire that the synodal process address questions of women's experience, recognition, and role arose near universally in the submissions made to Rome during the first part of the Listening Stage. This was a striking feature for the small group of us who read all of the first-stage submissions, and it was a discernible pattern across regions and global blocs. Alongside the other near-universal themes which arose—preaching, formation, access for those with disabilities, and pastoral inclusion of various excluded groups—the question of women was a matter emerging in almost every report. This provided the grounds for the statement in the Document for the Continental Stage that “from all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptized and equal members of the People of God.”<sup>6</sup> This statement functioned in two critical ways: it named the overwhelming presence of this theme in the local churches' reports, and it adopted the language and imagery used in the reports. The request for greater recognition of women, greater participation in a fuller range of roles, ministries, and so forth, was rooted in the language of the equal baptismal dignity of women. This framing ecclesiological language became the anchoring notion in the treatment of the question of women in all of the documents of the synodal process. It functioned in the texts as a foundational statement, theological and sociological and missiological. I should note at this point that in this volume Sandie Cornish raises some questions and reflections on this formulation.

However, we should be clear that the question of women, whilst near universally present, did not arise in a totally uniform or singular way in the reports from the local churches. The observations headed

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<sup>6</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” October 27, 2022, [synod.va/en/highlights/working-document-for-the-continental-stage.html](https://synod.va/en/highlights/working-document-for-the-continental-stage.html).

in two predominant directions: the first was to note the contribution of women to the life of the Church, the need for its recognition and celebration, and the acknowledgement and overcoming of various barriers and limitations to its fuller expression and reception, always for the sake of mission. The second emphasis was much more on the role and duty of the Church to respond to the inequalities, violence, and oppression faced by women in society. These reports noted the impact of war and violence on women, the poverty experienced by women, and the continued experience of domestic and familial violence. A lesser but present third theme in some reports related to the need for the Church to learn from society in relation to the inclusion of women in roles of leadership and governance. Some reports contained all three of those elements, others two, others one.

Additionally, all these questions and themes continued to resonate throughout the synodal process, and a clear tracing of their development can be found in the key public documents issued by the Synod. Indeed, a comparison between these documents is instructive. A brief attempt at this follows.

The first substantial text to address the question of women was the Document for the Continental Stage, drafted at Frascati in September 2022. This text aimed to summarize the themes present in the local churches' reports as they related to the Synod's three themes of participation, communion, and mission. The aim was not to overinterpret the material nor to correct what the People of God had said, but to restore to the local churches the joys, sorrows, prayers, and hopes they had articulated in a form within which they could recognize themselves. This was drafted in the mode of "listening," the phase of the synodal process it served. Whilst some were openly frustrated that the report did not correct, teach, or steer, it was clear that this was not the task Francis had set.

In this context, it is worth noting that a substantial five paragraphs (nos. 60–65) were given over to discussing the emergence of the theme of women in the local reports. They highlight:

- The contribution of women to the life of the Church, including to the synodal consultation itself.
- The love of women for the Church.
- A sadness expressed globally at the lack of full opportunities for women to contribute in all areas of the Church's life and a lack of recognition of much that is done already by women.
- A desire for women to be more involved in decision-making/taking processes.

- Church and society to be a place of flourishing for women, the Church to be an ‘ally’ of women. The document addresses the impoverishment, violence, and diminishment so many women face in societies and calls for the Church to be more attentive and closer to the lives of women, to walk with them.
- The situation of women religious is also raised, noting the request made by many women religious for greater recognition of their work in fair wages and working conditions and in attending to the economic, sexual, spiritual, and power abuse and discrimination they face, as well as drawing on their gifts more in decision-making processes.
- The document notes that the question of the diaconal and priestly ordination of women was raised in some reports, but not universally, and without a single version of that call. Some calls were for a separate female diaconate and others for the inclusion of women into the currently constituted diaconate.
- The document finishes by noting that women are now at the forefront of pushing synodal processes globally, animating synodality for our times.
- The discussion as a whole is framed therefore by a call for a new culture, new practices, and new structures to enable the baptismal dignity of all women and men to be fully recognized and drawn forth for mission.

The next significant document produced in the process moved its readers from the listening to the discernment phase. The *Instrumentum Laboris* (the official legal working document that would guide preparation and discussion during the first October Assembly), produced in late Spring 2023, framed the conversation about women slightly differently, reorienting the question of women towards mission. The question is posed: How can we better share gifts and tasks for the sake of mission? Emphasizing this and connecting the themes of dignity and mission, no. 54 notes:

A missionary synodal Church has a duty to ask itself how it can recognise and value the contribution that each Baptised person can offer in mission, going out of himself/herself and participating together with others in something greater. “To make an active contribution to the common good of humanity (CA 34)” is an

inalienable component of the dignity of the person, even within the Christian community.<sup>7</sup>

This is the framing for the worksheets at the end of the document that set out a very detailed list of concrete questions that aimed to turn the broader reflections of the Document for the Continental Stage and the reflections of the continental assemblies that had taken place, aided by the Document, into a series of concrete “how” questions. The worksheets for the 2023 *Instrumentum Laboris* therefore set these questions (Section B2.3):

- a) How can women be included in these areas in greater numbers and new ways?
- b) How, in consecrated life, can women be better represented in the Church’s governance and decision-making processes, better protected from abuse in all ecclesial contexts, and, where relevant, more fairly remunerated for their work?
- c) How can women contribute to governance, helping to promote greater accountability and transparency and strengthen trust in the Church?
- d) How can we deepen reflection on women’s contribution to theological reflection and the accompaniment of communities? How can we give space and recognition to this contribution in the formal processes of discernment at every level of the Church?
- e) What new ministries could be created to provide the means and opportunities for women’s effective participation in discernment and decision-making bodies? How can co-responsibility in decision-making processes be increased between lay and consecrated women and clergy in remote places and in challenging social contexts where women are frequently the main agents of pastoral care and evangelization? The contributions received during the first phase note that tensions with the ordained ministers arise where the dynamics of co-responsibility and shared decision-making processes are absent.

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<sup>7</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” October 2023, [press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html](https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html), no. 54.

The answers to these questions were the subject of the Synthesis Report produced in October 2023 in the wake of the discernment of the First Assembly.<sup>8</sup> On the question of women, in its various dimensions, the Synthesis Report largely repeats the framing of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which in one sense might be considered to show a reception of this framing. It notes complementarity and reciprocity as key framings and baptismal dignity as a helpful starting point and requests concrete action on listening and dialogue and inclusion of women in decision making. It calls for more study of the question of women in the diaconate. It addresses labor injustice of women religious in the Church, calls for greater access to formation and the greater involvement of women in seminary formation, and it calls for women's lives to be better represented in liturgical texts. Finally, it calls for women to be involved in greater numbers as judges in canonical processes.

The next substantial text to guide the process was the *Instrumentum Laboris* produced in late Spring 2024 to guide the final Assembly of October 2024.<sup>9</sup> This document provides an interesting development in the presentation of the question of women. The *Instrumentum Laboris* offers six paragraphs (nos. 13–18) on a renewed vision of reciprocity between men and women as sisters and brothers in the life of the Church. It notes sexual difference as the first difference the human being encounters, and it frames this difference in terms of reciprocity and interdependence of relations. It repeats the same themes as the Document for the Continental Stage, but adds to the theme of baptismal dignity a focus on reciprocity of relations. It also notes that many of the questions we might think of as “women’s” questions are often more broadly theological questions about the role of the laity, and many of them also apply to lay men. Nonetheless, there remains a particular kind of experience of women in the life of the Church that must be named as well; but we should be careful not to confuse ecclesiological questions about the lay and ordained states with questions about women alone. For example, calls for women to preach are usually questions of whether lay people can preach. This would include consecrated and lay women.

In sum, no. 13 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* offers a fuller theological grounding than the Document for the Continental Stage, highlighting three points of departure to guide the discussion of the

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<sup>8</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission, First Session,” October 2023, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session: *How to be a Missionary Synodal Church*,” October 2024, [press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/07/09/240709d.html](https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/07/09/240709d.html).

Assembly: baptismal dignity, reciprocal relations towards communion, the pouring out of gifts on the community and each person by the Spirit, and co-responsibility for mission. This theological treatment makes clear that it is the responsibility of the Church not to squander, limit, or hide the “talents,” gifts, charisms, and vocations poured out by the Spirit for the sake of the world. This leads to the question: are we discerning well the charisms of the Spirit given to us for the upbuilding of the community that is the Church and for the sake of sharing the Good News of salvation with all? In the case of women in particular, are we doing this as well as we might? The following paragraphs make clear that we need a change of mindset—a conversion towards relationality, reciprocity, true interdependence, and Christian friendship.

The further new element in this second *Instrumentum Laboris* is the introduction of an observation that runs through the rest of the documents—that, in fact, there remain many possible opportunities for the inclusion of women in decision-making roles provided for in canon law, and these remain often massively underused in most dioceses and in the Roman Curia. There is a plea to utilize even the current provision. No. 16 turns all these observations into a concrete list for the Assembly members to consider addressing and making their own. No. 17 reflects the diversity of opinion on the diaconate.

It is notable, then, that the Final Document of the Synod produced in October 2024 contains just one long paragraph on the question of women.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, it does not develop any new insights or framing beyond the *Instrumentum Laboris* of 2024 and Synthesis Report of 2023. Nonetheless, it bears the hallmarks of every document we have discussed on this journey, now in a more condensed form. It affirms the previous requests, although it is more limited in what it says about matters such as the diaconate, understanding this to be the territory now of Study Group 5 (still to issue its report at the date of my writing this Introduction).<sup>11</sup> It merely says the question remains open. It

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document,” October 26, 2024, no. 60, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26\\_final-document/ENG--Documento-finale.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG--Documento-finale.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Study Group 5 was created in the wake of the first Plenary Assembly in 2023. Alongside the other nine study groups created, its task was to give due consideration to a topic that could not sensibly be discerned within the restrictions of the synod assemblies. The brief for Study Group 5 was to look at some specific issues relating to ministerial forms, a rather oblique way of saying they would examine questions of women’s role, participation, charisms, and ministries within the church and give due attention to the wider question of ministerial theologies/forms that arose. Its origins lay in synod members requesting from the floor of the Assembly that proper consideration be given to questions concerning the diaconate and women. The Pope decided to widen the scope of the resulting study group so as not to confine it to this

requests the full implementation of provisions in canon law to enable women's fuller participation and makes a slightly coded, indirect statement with regard to theological anthropology—that there is no reason “or impediment” in principle why women cannot carry out leadership roles in the Church: The Holy Spirit is the bestower and the community is conformed to the Spirit's actions, discerning them in an orderly manner accordingly. What the Spirit wills cannot be thwarted. It repeats the call for attention to images, stories, and witnesses used in preaching, teaching and catechesis.

The essays collected in this volume are produced in the light of living through and contributing to these developments. Each piece also contributes to addressing the questions: Where are we now and what pathways do we need to take to continue addressing the multiplicity of questions relating to women and men that arose during the synod process? All the matters laid out in no. 60 of the Final Document of the Synod reveal the necessity of several levels of differentiated, although not disconnected, conversation. What is more, as Klara Csiszar notes in her contribution to this volume, the content of the paragraph raises questions that it itself does not provide mechanisms to answer. In this volume, all contributors raise pertinent questions about women's participation and particular contributions to positions of leadership service, and the ecclesiological and canonical basis of this participation. The document alludes to the question of women and the diaconate remaining “open” to study, but does not address the question about the meaningful and coherent pathway for discernment of that question, spelling out what that discernment process should consist of, which is to say, its method of working theologically and ecclesologically. It is unclear what the matter remaining “open” means without that clarity, for those of all opinions and views.

However, perhaps the larger although less coherently presented task that emerges as the specter of no. 60 lies in the terrain of theological anthropology, on the one hand, and ecclesiology, on the other. Indeed, it is the bleeding and blending of the two: where theological anthropology and ecclesiology find themselves meeting. Often, the conversation about women seemed to flounder in the arena of assumed theological anthropologies around sex and gender, and the failure of the church in recent decades to produce compelling theological reflection on this subject. The invocation of “gender ideology” as a heresy, whilst strongly felt by some, often functioned

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question alone. It is expected to make public its report in Spring 2026. [Editor's note: The report was issued in March 2026, titled “The Participation of Women in the Life and Leadership of the Church.” It is available at [synod.va/content/dam/synod/process/implementation/10workinggroups/final-reports/sg5/SG-5\\_ENG\\_Final-Report.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/process/implementation/10workinggroups/final-reports/sg5/SG-5_ENG_Final-Report.pdf).]

to simply shut down a properly theological discussion that might have opened up helpful, tentative new vistas. This is not merely a question that so-called progressives have a stake in, as Renée Köhler-Ryan's contribution to this volume makes clear. Her article makes clear that discussions of women's roles and vocations were caught up in related but also distinguishable conversations about the gendered theological imaginary applied to the church itself. Indeed, one of the major challenges for working with Pope Francis's own vision on these matters was his attachment to a very specific "applied" version of a Balthasarian rendering of Marian and Petrine principles, rendered as a literal ecclesiology of men and women, arguably a perspective that is not only debatable as a desired formulation per se, but also a problematic act of theological translation of Balthasar himself. Köhler-Ryan here argues for a more critically attuned retrieval of complementarian language.

Therefore, what emerges from the synodal process is a series of concrete questions about the lives of baptized women who seek to live out their calling and respond to charisms and the needs of mission in today's church. What also emerges are questions of the relational conversion of men and women towards a model of living well as a communal subject in history. These are "common good" questions about baptismal and Eucharistic life. Related to this, because they are always integral questions, are the questions of how the church is living out its vocation as set out not least in Matthew 25, to tend the needs of the world for justice and love and particularly to learn better how to love our women neighbors as ourselves, understanding the dimensions of suffering that come in, indeed are manufactured in, sexed and gendered form. However, none of those tasks will be complete without parallel attention to the ways in which, through the habitus of church life and through the production of formal theologies, we reproduce notions of sex and gender as an aesthetic for our ecclesiology. This volume, in a small way, hopes to lay bare some of these questions, born of experience, witness and scholarship, and tentatively articulate some of the directions the next stages of this conversation could take.

In the first contribution to this special issue, Catherine Clifford argues for viewing the Synod on Synodality as a further step in the theology expounded by the Second Vatican Council, offering a development in both the practice and teaching regarding the agency and co-responsibility of women in light of a shared baptismal dignity. She foregrounds the synodal dimensions of the 'question' of women as part of the call for a continual conversion of culture. Clifford offers an illuminating and theologically constructive comparison of the experience of women auditors at Vatican II, who fought hard to be recognized as full ecclesial subjects, to the participation of women in the Synod, and also charts the evolution of texts and teaching of the

Council as it pertains to both the question of women and also to the wider baptismal theology of the People of God, the wells from which the Synod so centrally drew. She traces the legacy of the Council in subsequent consultations that took place and, in many ways, paved the way for the synodal process of 2021–24. In an account that embeds and does not exceptionalize the discussions of the Synod on Synodality, Clifford charts the echoes and continuities that emerge when we read the texts and processes of the last sixty years as a single ecclesial movement, with both obstacles and blocks as well as insights and developments.

Klara Csiszar develops her account in parallel with Clifford's contribution. She traces the relationship between the baptismal ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and the Synod on Synodality, drawing particular attention to the connections between the vision in *Lumen Gentium* nos. 32 and 37 and no. 60 of the Synod's Final Document. She explores the way in which the Synod grappled with the Council's vision that was not yet a fully inaugurated practice: "the full recognition of women as baptized members with all consequent implications for decision-making." Viewing the question and experience of women as a matter of a traceable, dynamic evolution in the life of the Church, she also attempts to center the Synod's emphasis on place, culture, and context, integrating this into her own reflection on women and the future of synodal renewal. She argues for theological and ecclesial approaches that are more able to grapple with the reality of women's lives and the possibilities of their ecclesial roles viewed through the lens of the "tensions of cultural and contextual realities." Her own biographical contribution to such an approach is drawn powerfully from her own Communist and post-Communist experience in Eastern and Central Europe.

Christina Kheng's contribution develops a systematic theological reflection on the question and language of leadership. During the days of the Synod Assemblies, certain words became hotly contested, including language related to leadership. The same was true for discussions of transparency or accountability, where some judged the words too secular and Anglophone. A brief time was spent examining the scriptural and theological basis of this language, but more extensive reflection was not possible within the time available, given the breadth of the agenda. Kheng's article helpfully deepens this critical thinking about the language of leadership. She suggests six theologically and pastorally oriented verbs that express the kind of leadership needed in a synodal Church. She proposes leadership that: orients towards mission; listens in order to discern together; promotes charisms, ministries, and the development of persons; establishes structures that work well; embraces the life of mutuality in all areas of ecclesial life; and cultivates the life of communion. This leadership is

situated as a differentiated task shared by all the baptized. Kheng's article also brings a crucial Asian voice into the conversation and someone who was involved centrally in all stages of the synodal process.

In the first of three articles in this collection that emerge from the combined experience of the synodal process in the Australian Church and the Assemblies in Rome, Renée Köhler-Ryan draws on her philosophical training and her interest in the women scholars and mystics and combines this with the auto-ethnographic rendering of her involvement in Australia and Rome. She rightly identifies that the Synod could find no common language—other than the agreement on the baptismal equality of men and women—in which to speak more deeply about the role and contribution of women in the church or society. In a plea to make progress on finding such a language, she pushes against the limitations of the complementarian language associated with rigid binaries and false idealizations that turn complementarian claims into ideological weapons. Warning of such faux complementarian claims that render women passive, receptive, and demure, she makes a case for a retrieval and development of a different, more hopeful strand of complementarianism instead. She draws resources for this integral complementarity—a dynamic and evolving account of the capacities and relations of men and women—from figures including Edith Stein.

The second contribution stemming from involvement in both Rome and Australia comes from Sandie Cornish. Whilst Köhler-Ryan was a speaking, voting member of the Synod, Cornish was a facilitator. She draws on her experience of playing a guiding yet muted role and uses this positioning imaginatively to consider what she would have said had she been able to speak and draft in her own voice. Locating her account in participant observation methodology, Cornish examines her perception of the marginalization of the voice of Catholic social teaching, her own disciplinary expertise. She challenges the emphasis on baptismal dignity to reframe the way that dignity language could have been used in the process. She also introduces a focus on what is perceived as the missing language of subsidiarity across the synodal process. Such a dual emphasis—on dignity lifted out of a narrowly baptismal frame and subsidiarity as a basis for thinking about co-responsible and participatory renewal—remains a path to be developed in the wake of the silences and absences of the synodal process.

In the third contribution, straddling the Australian process and the Roman Assemblies, Susan Pascoe draws on her experience in governance and ethics in public life to reflect on what might be learned about the listening orientation of the synodal process as an aid to healthy governance. Pascoe foregrounds Pope Francis's appeal to a

change of ecclesial culture, not just of structures or processes. In this light, she seeks to evaluate the methodology of Conversation in the Spirit as an aid to that change of culture, with a focus on the themes of power, participation, and responsibility. To aid this evaluation, she offers comparative case studies from civil government, concluding with a series of lessons and insights for a synodality more attentive to power, participation, and responsibility.

In the final full article, Avril Baigent, who was a facilitator at the second Assembly and is a scholar of Lived Religion/Catholicism, uses a collaborative roundtable methodology to draw together the voices of five contributors to this volume, along with one additional voice who was unable to contribute a full article. Baigent created an online space for shared reflection amongst the authors on the questions of vocation, baptism, and mission that each piece explores. Her method draws further biographical reflection from each author, as well as enabling a clearer account of the obstacles to fuller recognition to women's dignity and capacity to contribute to the task of mission.

The special issue concludes with an afterword written by Kristin Colberg. She reflects on both the themes of the volume as a whole and also draws on her own experience as a contributor to the synodal journey. Colberg contributed to the Frascati group's work to discern the materials produced by the local churches and to the Document for the Continental Stage. She has also contributed significantly to the US Church's synodal process. Colberg concludes where we began, with a powerful reminder: "In the church's efforts to embrace greater synodality, the role of women in the ecclesial community is not merely one topic among others. Instead, the full participation of women is constitutive of what it means to be a synodal church." **M**

**Anna Rowlands** is the St. Hilda Professor of Catholic Social Thought and Practice at Durham University, UK. She is a member of the Centre for Catholic Studies in the Department of Theology and Religion. She is Chair of the UK Centre for Catholic Social Thought and Practice. She was seconded to the Synod on Synodality for three years. Amongst her publications is *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (Bloomsbury, 2021), which won the 2023 Expanded Reason Prize, awarded by the Ratzinger Foundation.